

COUNTERING THE RADICAL RIGHT

Germany: is the COVID-19 pandemic weakening the far right?

German far-right responses to the COVID-19 pandemic reveal their lack of social responsibility.

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Banner in Goettingen, Germany reads: "Corona solidarity must not end at national borders" | Fotostand / Harald Kuhl/DPA/PA Images. All rights reserved



Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right

As the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting public life across the globe, the far-right “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident” (PEGIDA) which emerged from the eastern German city of Dresden has difficulties to conform with the new safety and health regulations. Since autumn 2014, PEGIDA has regularly mobilized street protests against the alleged increasing influence of Islam in Europe, the German and European political establishment, as well as the media.

Disruption of the ritual

PEGIDA had announced one of its regular demonstrations for Monday, 16 March 2020. But when the government of the state of Saxony decided to cancel all events with more than 1,000 participants on 12 March, the city of Dresden tried to convince the PEGIDA organizers to suspend the protest. Unimpressed by the safety and health measures adopted all over Europe already at that point, PEGIDA insisted on going ahead with the demonstration anyway, supposedly applying additional safety measures.

In light of the aggravating situation over the following days, the city administration finally forbade the demonstration. Again unimpressed, PEGIDA co-founder Lutz Bachmann defiantly announced a “patriotic week” full of “spontaneous appearances” in Dresden and neighboring cities in a YouTube video on 13 March.

Eventually, not a single protest event took place – neither on Monday 16 March, nor later that week. The key reason was that co-founder Bachmann got stuck on the island of Tenerife, where he resides since 2016, when Spain decided to quarantine its entire population.

After many civil society calls for banning PEGIDA from Dresden’s iconic squares over the past years, most recently with an ongoing public petition by the band

Banda Internationale, it seems that the COVID-19 pandemic caused what thorough

implementation of the rule of law and civil rights such as the freedom of speech and association had so long prevented: to remove PEGIDA's protest ritual from the streets.

PEGIDA's populist response

PEGIDA's interpretation of the forced cancellation of the Monday demonstration bore starkly populist argumentation patterns. Indeed, the organizers condemned the city's enforcement of the ban of public events as an attempt by 'the elites' to silence 'the people' in the context of the ongoing 'asylum crisis' at the Greek-Turkish border.

PEGIDA thus assumed the role of the victim of an alleged elitist conspiracy against unwanted street protest. This is a well-used image in far-right discourses that far predates the outbreak of the pandemic.

Since 2014, PEGIDA typically refers to the media as the "lying press" and to politicians as "traitors" in speeches and on social media. Most recently, co-founder Bachmann accused the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution of "premeditated libel".

The protectors of the German constitution had called him a "far-right extremist" in the context of their decision to 'observe' the extremist party wing *Der Flügel* (The Wing), associated with the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), on grounds of anti-constitutional activity.

Not even the German border closure placated PEGIDA. On 16 March 2020, the Merkel government decided to temporarily close the German borders in order to slow down the outbreak of COVID-19. Although Bachmann and his team have been campaigning for border closure since 2014, they harshly criticized this decision. In one of his daily YouTube videos, Bachmann explained that the temporary closure would not be able to prevent the "wave of refugees from Africa" – the only 'crisis' PEGIDA seems to be concerned about.

A snail of style

PEGIDA's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic indicates a break with the organizers' self-image as responsible and worthy representatives of 'the *VolK* (the people). As I show in a recently published journal article, the claim to truly represent the needs and concerns of 'patriotic Europeans' has typically been at the core of PEGIDA's populist discourse and style.

The demonstrators usually hold that the Merkel government does not sufficiently protect Germany's citizens from threats to their security – specifically, from the alleged threat of non-European immigration. Against the backdrop of current events, it seems somewhat paradoxical that the protestors view non-European immigration as a more pressing menace than the spread of the coronavirus – not least as large segments of the PEGIDA supporters belong to the risk group due to their age.

PEGIDA's social irresponsibility for the sake of political activism mirrors the AfD's approach in the Saxon parliament. The AfD was the only party faction to oppose a so-called emergency parliament, that is an assembly of drastically reduced size. As a consequence of the legal prescriptions, the Saxon parliament had to convene in its original size of 119 deputies on 18 March – when other public institutions such as schools and kindergartens were already closed. The AfD claimed that this step was necessary in order to declare a "state of catastrophe" which the other parties considered as "unnecessary panic mongering" at that stage.

Calling for legal states of catastrophe or emergency is a core tactics of extremist actors across the West, writes the German sociologist and director of the "Institute for Democracy and Civil Society", Matthias Quent, in a much-discussed piece for the online version of the newspaper *Die Zeit*. He argues that the far-right takes advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to weaken liberal democracies by spreading dystopian phantasies of decline and pushing for states of emergency. PEGIDA's approach to the pandemic has been to neglect it, but the goal – to weaken German democracy – stays the same.

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